

The Philosophical Concepts of Good and Evil

The Best of All Possible Worlds (LEIBNIZ)
and the Radical Evil (KANT)

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To God all things are beautiful, good, and just; but
men have assumed some things to be unjust, others
just.

HERACLITUS, Fragment 102

WHAT DISTINGUISHES a philosophical view of evil from a psychological, an ethical, or any anthropological view is that philosophers do not single out any particular sphere or aspect of existence, but consider it as a whole. We give the name of *world* to the whole of natural existence and look upon man too as part of it. But it is not universally recognized that the world is the one and all of existence. The Book of Genesis teaches that the world is the perishable creation of a God existing above and outside the world, who willed it into existence for the sake of man. In consequence of this biblical doctrine, the question arose: Is God also the principle of evil, and if not, what is its source? The biblical answer is the source of evil is not God, but man's anti-divine will. Here evil is not imputed to God and the world, but exclusively to man. It is situated in man's attitude toward God and understood anthropo-theologically. God himself, as the absolutely perfect, good, and benevolent being cannot be the source of evil, and a perfectly evil being is in the last analysis a contradiction, because then Satan would be as omnipotent and omniscient as God, and that is inconceivable. The source of evil can reside only in man, who has transgressed God's commandments. In the course of the development from Christian theology to post-Christian philosophy, good and evil came to be considered more and more in a purely anthropological light, without reference to God and the world. Evil came to be regarded as the prerogative of man taken as an ethical being, capable both of good and

evil. Evil ceased to be a metaphysical imperfection or a physical taint, and was restricted to the ethical sphere. But if the differentiation between good and evil is relevant only to man (and to him only as an ethical person), and not to the world as a whole and still less to God, then, terrifying as the thought may be, it is not *fundamentally* relevant to the totality of being—unless we attribute a universal significance to man, unless we suppose that man *determines* the nature and meaning of the world, and is not merely a perishable being of it.

Thus, if we are to discuss the question of evil philosophically, that is, with regard to the whole, we must take into account the three fundamental concepts: God, world, and man. But because this differentiation of God, world, and man originated (in the course of a development that we have almost lost sight of today) with the view of man and the world set forth in the biblical legend of the creation; and because this legend cannot be understood philosophically but is a matter of faith, we shall have to take as our starting point the world view presented in Greek philosophy and then compare the post-Christian conceptions of evil formulated by Leibniz and Kant with the pre-Christian view of the cosmos as the “best and most beautiful”¹ of everything that has come into being.

I

THE WORLD as the Greeks saw it is a physical cosmos, that is, an all-embracing world order which is excellent or “good” as such, and “beautiful” in more than an esthetic sense—“an eternal ornament,” as Goethe says in *Faust*, translating *kosmos* literally. In Greek linguistic usage this “excellent order” can relate to very different things: for example, to the artful arrangement of a garden or to anything that is ornamental, to the structure of a good story, to the organization

1. Plato *Timaeus* 29a.

of a juridical system or of an army, or to the inner "disposition" of an estimable man. All these are *kata kosmon*. Aristotle calls human greatness of soul "cosmos-like," because manhood requires an inner order, a subordination of the lower impulses and strivings to the higher. Similarly Plato calls domination of one's own body and ethical behavior *kosmion* and *kosmiotes*. As Plato says in the *Gorgias*, one and the same order holds heaven and earth, gods and men together. The order of the physical cosmos is manifested pre-eminently in the regular cycles of the heavenly bodies, especially the sun, whose circuits determine day and night and the order of the seasons, and are the precondition to all life on earth. No one who considers the regular movements of the heavenly bodies and the coming-into-being and passing-away of living things on earth can fail to note that everything is well ordered and follows definite rules. The cosmos is neither a chaos nor a *creatio ex nihilo* which was corrupted by the anti-divine obstinacy of man and has been in need of redemption ever since; on the contrary, it is divine. The cosmology of the early Greek thinkers is a natural theology and as such a theme of philosophy. The godhead is no personal subject above and outside of the world, but a predicate of the world. It is everlasting and indestructible, unshakable, and incorruptible. Regardless of what comes into being and passes away within the cosmos, the totality of existence is eternal, without beginning and end. As a whole (*holon*), it is entirely what it is, it is perfect, for it lacks nothing. As a perfect whole, it is at the same time divine, *to theion*. "God," says Heraclitus, "is day, night, winter, summer, war, peace, satiety, famine."² He is also life and death, waking and sleeping. By virtue of a divine principle that permeates it, the world is an all-encompassing order, "the same for all," made by no particular god and by no man.³ In Greek philosophy this divine order of the world is also called *ananke* and *moira*,

2. Heraclitus, Fr. 67.

3. *Ibid.*, Fr. 30.

necessity or fate, not in the sense of something imposed on man against his will, but in the positive, cosmological sense of a supreme order, in accordance with which nothing happens arbitrarily or by accident, but always with absolute necessity. What happens once this way and once in another way is not in order. If sun, moon, and stars did not move in regularly ordered paths, or if a man should one day engender a dog, there would be no human nature and no natural world, but only an incalculable disorder, a chaos closed to investigation rather than a cosmos that can be investigated.

The Socratic turn away from the investigation of the cosmos toward the questions of the *polis* and the human soul did not change this cosmological starting point of Greek philosophy. In the *Timaeus*, Plato once again set forth a cosmology without which his "republic" would be inconceivable; for him, too, the archetype and model of the human world remained the order of the celestial world.⁴ In the *Laws* the absolute pre-eminence of the great world reason is stated as follows:

And one of these portions of the universe is thine own, unhappy man, which, however little, contributes to the whole; and you do not seem to be aware that this and every other creation is for the sake of the whole. . . . And you are annoyed because you are ignorant how what is best for you happens to you and the universe, as far as the laws of the common creation admit.⁵

To the Greek thinker what is astonishing and admirable is not the immemorial fact *that* the world is—for this would imply that it might not be, or might be different from what it is—but that this age-old and eternally young world of nature is as it is; that is, wonderfully ordered, cosmic, and not chaotic. But what an exertion of thought was needed to see the world as a cosmos for the first time is shown by the many mythical cosmogonies and theogonies in which the cosmos

4. See, for example, *Timaeus* 29a–30c; 47a–c; 90b–d; *Republic* 500c–d.

5. Plato *Laws* 903b, trans. Jowett (New York, 1937), II, 644.

gradually issues from chaos in the course of hard battles among the world gods.

This eternal cosmos, made by no god and no man, "the same for all," dominated classical thought from Heraclitus to Pliny, the Roman general and naturalist of the first century A.D. His natural history contains a hymn to the *mundus*, whose eloquence cannot readily be translated:

Mundus sacer est, aeternus, immensus; totus in toto, immo vero ipse totum; infinitus et finito similis; omnium rerum certus and similis incerto; extra, intra, cuncta complexus in se; idemque rerum naturae opus et rerum ipsa natura. ("The world is sacred, eternal, immeasurable; all in all and itself the one whole; infinite and yet similar to the finite; certain in all things and yet similar to the uncertain; it embraces everything in itself, the external and that which is hidden within; it is at once a product of the nature of things and itself the nature of things.")

This Roman *mundus* is identical with the Greek *kosmos*: the divine and eternal totality of that which by nature exists and endures. But from the Augustan Age on, *kosmos* or *mundus* came to signify primarily the human world and the inhabited earth, and in the Hellenistic period, when many turned away from the visible world to seek the salvation of their souls in subterranean mystery cults, the cosmos ceased to be loved and honored. A fragment from the first or second century A.D. prophesied this loss of the world:

A time will come when men will be so glutted that the cosmos will neither be admired nor seem worthy of worship. This greatest good in its totality, the best thing that has ever been, that is, or will ever be seen, will be endangered. It will be a burden to man and despised. This whole cosmos will no longer be loved, this glorious edifice, this One, unique and multiform, which can be seen, revered, praised and loved by all those who see.⁶

6. Pseudoapuleische Asclepius III, 25. Quoted by W. Kranz, *Kosmos*, I (Bonn, 1955) p. 95.

This unworldly mood of late antiquity was close to the world renunciation of the early Christians. The Greek cosmos was unknown to the Old and New Testament. People who lived not by seeing, by *theorein*, but by a pious hearkening to God's word and will, could not see the cosmos as cosmos, but could conceive of it only as a purposive creation. But if the world was created with a view to man by a God situated above and outside it, a God who has revealed himself once and for all to humankind in a unique God-man, the everlasting world is degraded and denatured; it loses the perfection of totality and self-sufficiency, the autonomous movement of the *physis* which needs no outside creator because it produces itself. This alternative between a natural view of the world and a view grounded in faith was excellently formulated by Augustine when he wrote:

Of things visible, the world is the greatest: of invisible, God. But the first we see, the second we only believe. That God made the world, whom shall we believe more reliably than Himself? Where have we heard Him? Never better than in the Holy Scriptures, where the prophet says: "In the beginning God created heaven and earth."⁷

This invisible and unknowable God of the biblical Genesis (which is no physical genesis) is not, like the divine principle of Greek cosmo-theology, related directly to the world, but only to a particular creature, the one and only image of God, namely man. If the physical cosmos is no longer looked upon as the greatest and highest, or as merely the greatest and highest among visible things; if the highest and best is an invisible, but believed, creator God and the whole world is God's personal creation (dependent and therefore perishable), then belief in this biblical God opens up an anthropological conception of the world, a world which exists for the sake of man. Only with this theologically motivated humanization of the world did the question of evil take on a

7. St. Augustine, *The City of God*, XI, 4, trans. John Healey (Everyman, 1945), I, 314 [slightly modified].

fundamental and universal significance—fundamental because it is grounded in man, and universal because of its relevance to the order of the world. Only then did men inquire into the origin of evil and at the same time attempt to answer the question by a theodicy, that is, by a justification of God for having created the human world with its imperfection and evil, in contrast to the Greek cosmos which, as the totality of natural existence, was perfect and beautiful, indeed, the “best and most beautiful” of all things.

II

THE BIBLICAL STORY of Creation, whose foundation is God's covenant with man, relates how God first created heaven and earth, then the living creatures, and finally man as His only image and likeness. At the end of each day of the Creation “God saw that it [His Creation] was good.” Thus the source of evil is neither God nor the world He created; evil is a voluntary act of self-willed man, who does not obey God's will. It is something negative. Eve and Adam ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in defiance of God's will. Neither good nor evil can be known without the other, and consequently the simple goodness of Creation before the fall was pre-human and pre-ethical, in contrast to the good *and* evil (inseparable and mutually determinant) which have now entered the world. With the fall, man was banished from the good world that God had created; he became guilty and mortal and condemned to eat bread in the sweat of his brow. And not only did God curse man, He also cursed the earth “for man's sake.” Thus the future redemption of fallen man applies not only to man but also to the world of nature which was corrupted at the same time. Adam and Eve brought forth first Cain and then Abel, and with Cain's fratricide began the history of the human race as a history of sin. When, after several generations, man's self-willed wickedness gained the upper hand, God repented of having created humankind and decided to destroy them all with the exception of one God-

fearing man, Noah, and his family. With Noah and his seed, human history resumed after the flood as the history of salvation, to end, after repeated backslidings into disobedience, in the Last Judgment.

The Church Fathers and theologians, from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and from Luther to Barth, have repeatedly commented on and interpreted this story of Creation. And when, at the beginning of the modern era, philosophy asserted its independence and rebelled against the scholastic tradition, it remained, up to its culmination in Hegel and beyond Hegel to Nietzsche, under the influence of the Christian tradition.

For Francis Bacon the essential fallacy of Greek philosophy, springing from its pagan character, was to have regarded the world as an image of the divine and man as a "compendious image of the world," whereas the Holy Scriptures teach that though the world is God's work, only man is His image and likeness. Descartes' experiment in doubt, in which he makes bold to ask whether God might not be an evil deceiver, ends with a proof of the existence of God, for without certainty of God all our knowledge of the world and ourselves would remain uncertain, and this proof of the existence of God includes the old biblical doctrine of man as God's image and likeness. Kant, it is true, interpreted the Christian religion "within the limits of mere reason" and demonstrated that man's freedom was the root of evil, but his critique of reason was at the same time intended to open up an area of faith. Fichte wrote "instructions for a life of beatitude" and was accused of atheism only because he offered a philosophical interpretation of the Christian revealed faith. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* is a "theodicy," which follows the ways of God, who is Spirit, through the history of the world. (Hegel's Absolute Spirit is a fusion of the Aristotelian *nous* with the *logos* of the Gospel of St. John.) Schelling developed a philosophy of Christian revelation and the profound speculations on the origin of evil contained in his essay on the "Essence of Human Freedom" are

thoroughly Christian in inspiration. But even *after* Nietzsche, the first modern thinker who dared to say that the world was self-enclosed and beyond good and evil, Jaspers, writing in the Kantian tradition, postulated a "philosophical faith," declaring the idea of a Creation to be superior to the conception of an eternal world. The idea of the Creation, Jaspers holds, is indispensable to man if he is to know his own essence, for the essence of man is a transcending to "Transcendence" (and what is this "Transcendence" but a pallid version of God?). Thus the thinkers of the Enlightenment did not eliminate, but merely rationalized, Christian faith as the foundation of their thinking. Post-Christian thought is still dominated by the Book of Genesis with its story of how evil had its source in man's will. This is particularly evident in Kant, who, in an essay written in 1786, gives a philosophical interpretation of Genesis, purporting to show that its teachings coincide with those of philosophy. "Thus the history of *nature* begins with the good, for it is the *work of God*; the history of *freedom* begins with evil, for it is the *work of man*."⁸ But how does this human freedom to do evil fit in with the excellence of the natural world which a good God created for man's sake and which, Genesis tells us, "was good." Do not wickedness and evil, attested in countless examples, argue against the all-powerful wisdom and goodness of the Creator? Numerous attempts were made in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to resolve this cruel contradiction. The most significant is the "Theodicy" of Leibniz, which appeared in 1710. It grew out of conversations between Leibniz and Queen Sophie of Prussia about P. Bayle, the second edition of whose *Dictionnaire Historique et Critique* had appeared in 1702, creating an enormous stir with its attempt to prove that revealed faith is incompatible with reason. In his "Theodicy," Leibniz tried to provide a rational, philosophical foundation for the flagging faith of those whom Bayle's arguments had shaken.

8. Immanuel Kant, "Mutmasslicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte," *Werke*, ed. Cassirer, IV, 325 ff.

The full title of this book is: *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme, et l'origine du mal*. It is an attempt to justify God's goodness in the face of the evil which came into the world through man's freedom. In response to Bayle, who had taken a skeptical attitude towards God's omnipotence and wisdom, Leibniz undertook to show that the presence of evil within God's creation is not only necessary but actually beneficial. From the very outset he considers the problem of evil in conjunction with the questions of God and the world. Thus his inquiry is philosophical in the sense defined at the beginning of the present paper: It does not relate exclusively or even primarily to man, but embraces God and the world as a whole. Leibniz himself says as much in the motto of his "Theodicy": "Is it then to be wondered at that we men can know the world, since it is in us and since each one of us, on a small scale, is an image (*exemplum*) of God?" Democritus had already said that man has his prototype in the cosmos and is himself a microcosmos, and anyone who reads Plato without Christian spectacles will find countless remarks to the same effect. What is specifically Christian in Leibniz is the end of his sentence, in which he says that we and only we are the image and likeness of a transcendent God who revealed Himself in the person of a man and not, or not so directly, in the physical world, and that this defines the specific essence of man. From this position of pre-eminence, which the Bible accords to man in the world as a whole, flows the problem of evil as a fundamental problem, and with it the attempt to answer the question with a theodicy; that is, to explain why, when God created man, He admitted evil into the world. It never occurred to any Greek philosopher that the eternal world order, the cosmos, might require *justification* merely because mortal man fomented disorder within his petty world of the *polis*, because human society is unjust and not as well ordered as the eternal cycles of the celestial world. But to Leibniz, thinking within the framework of the biblical doctrine of creation, the world as a whole was not an inherently necessary order, which is as

it is and cannot be otherwise. To him it was the totality of all "contingent" things, that is, of things which might perfectly well be otherwise or not at all, if God as their Creator had willed otherwise or had not willed at all. Assuming that God is an absolute Creator-God, who with His word of command created the world out of nothingness and in so doing chose one particular world among many others that would also have been possible, Leibniz proceeds to ask whether God chose and created the best of all possible worlds. To all appearances He did not. For obviously this world of ours is not free from metaphysical, physical, and ethical evils. Yet Leibniz insists not only that this is the best of all possible worlds, but that freedom from evils would make it no better. "Accordingly, if the slightest evil that is present in the world were lacking, it would no longer be this world which—all things considered—the Creator who chose it held to be the best."⁹ How can Leibniz, a man of rational and mathematical mind, make so seemingly paradoxical an assertion in response to Bayle's acute arguments?

Leibniz briefly states Bayle's position in the form of a syllogism: He who creates something in which evil is contained is not making the *best* decision; an omnipotent God could have created the world without evil or could have abstained from creating the world altogether. But God did create this world with its evils; accordingly, He did not make the best possible decision. One who does not make the best decision is lacking either in power or in wisdom or in goodness. Leibniz argues in reply: It cannot be denied that various kinds of evil—metaphysical, physical, and ethical—are present in this world; granted also that it must have been possible for God to create a world without evils or to abstain from creating a world. The question is: Would a world devoid of evils have been better? In order to demonstrate that the evil which God admitted is the greatest good and that a world without evils would not only not have been better, but would

9. Leibniz, *Essais de Théodicée sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme, et l'origine du Mal* (1710), § 7.

have been worse, Leibniz starts from a scholastic definition originating with Augustine, according to which the origin of evil is not anything positive and independent, but an absence of good, a *causa deficiens*, a flaw or defect. Such a deficiency is imputable to the limitation of finite creatures, whose limited receptivity to the perfect and the good is the cause of their errors. Hence evil—like darkness, which is only a lack of light—is merely a lack of goodness. *Bonum ex causa integra, malum ex quodlibet defecta*. There is no more a specific, independent principle of evil than there is a specific principle of darkness, for both spring from an absence of the positive, which reveals itself and its contrary.¹⁰

In order to judge evils correctly, Leibniz goes on, we must consider them in the total context of existence, in which all things act upon, and are attuned to, one another. But this harmonious whole is predominantly good, that is, not “good” in a restricted ethical sense, but excellent in the manner of a well-functioning machine whose parts are perfectly adjusted to one another and whose motion is well ordered. With its admirably ordered structure, each individual totality—a plant, an animal, a human organism—confirms our belief that God made all things as excellent as possible, though as Christians we must be careful not to make a God of the world or, like most of the pagan philosophers, to conceive of God as a world soul. Abortions and other shortcomings are merely the exception which confirms the general norm and rule of the created world order. Moreover, there are cases in which a certain disorder and imperfection of the part is necessary to produce the greatest order and perfection in the whole, and God is not so lacking in power as to be unable to put evil into the service of the greatest good. Thus, for example, a general would prefer a great victory with a small wound to a great defeat with no wound at all. In agreement with the apostle Paul¹¹ and with Augustine, Leibniz maintains that God coun-

10. Cf. “*Sane sicut seipsam et tenebras manifestat, sic veritas norma sui et falsi est.*” (Spinoza, Eth. II. Prop. 43.)

11. Romans 5:20.

tenances evils in order to gain a greater good from them. To speak with the Easter Eve liturgy, the fall, that source of all ethical evils, is a *felix culpa*, because it was corrected with incalculable profit when God became incarnated with a view to redeeming man. But to refute Bayle's arguments, it suffices to demonstrate that a world in which evil is included might be better than a world without evils. If we are to understand this, we must reject the mistaken notion that a whole can only be perfect if each of its parts is perfect, for actually each part of a perfect whole is not necessarily as perfect as it might have been.

Leibniz illustrates this idea by mathematics. Here too there are apparent irregularities which, followed out to the end, point to a great order:

A line may bend forward and backward, it may rise and fall, it can have points of intersection, changes of direction, interruptions, and other peculiarities, so that it does not seem to make sense, especially if we consider only a part of the line. And yet it is possible to indicate its equation and system, in which a mathematician would find the basis and harmony of all these supposed irregularities. It is in this light that we must also judge the irregularity of abortions and other supposed shortcomings in the universe.¹²

Thus we should not be over-hasty in drawing conclusions in respect of the whole from our observation of a few irregularities and evils. In reply to Bayle's contention that the history of the human race is nothing more than a catalogue of calamities and crimes, as the prisons and hospitals of the world bear witness, it can be argued that the number of dwelling houses far exceeds that of prisons and that most men steer a middle course between virtue and vice. Unbiased observation shows that the majority of men lead tolerable lives. We should not look at the world in too close perspective.

You have only known the world for three days, you see no further than the ends of your noses; and nevertheless you

12. Leibniz, § 242.

feel justified in finding fault with it? Wait until you know the world better, pay special attention to the parts which provide a complete whole (comparable to organic bodies); then you will discover an art and beauty that surpass all imagination. From this let us infer the wisdom and goodness of the author of all things, including the things we do not know. We find in the universe things we do not like; but we should know that the universe is not made for us alone. Nevertheless it is made for us if we are wise; it will adapt itself to us if we adapt ourselves to it; we shall be happy in it if we wish to be.¹³

These considerations puncture Bayle's seemingly cogent argument that though the celestial world discloses God's wisdom, man, that supposed masterwork of Creation, justifies the greatest misgivings about God's goodness and wisdom.

A special reason for the seeming disorder in the human sphere is moreover to be found in the following: God has given man an image of His divinity by endowing him with reason. In a sense God leaves man free in his small sphere. He Himself participates only in a hidden way, He provides Being, force, life, and reason, without giving Himself to be seen. This is the area of free will: but God plays, as it were, with the little gods whom He has seen fit to create, just as we play with children, secretly helping or hindering them in their occupations as we choose. Thus man is in a sense a little god in his own world, his microcosm, which he governs in his way: sometimes he does wonders in it and often his skill equals that of nature. But he also makes great mistakes, because he follows his passions and because God has left him at the mercy of his perverse mind. . . . Evil occurs most frequently when rational beings or their little worlds clash. On such occasions men find themselves in bad situations, which become worse the more they are in the wrong; but with miraculous art, God employs all these little flaws for the greater beauty of His great world. One is reminded of those inventions in perspective which make certain fine drawings seem utterly confused, until we bring

13. *Ibid.*, § 194.

them into their true focus or look at them with the help of a certain lens or mirror. By placing them correctly or making the proper use of them, we can make them the ornament of a room. Thus the seeming deformations of our little worlds combine to form beauty in the great world and in no wise conflict with the unity of an all-embracing, infinitely perfect principle: on the contrary, they enhance our admiration for its wisdom, which puts evil into the service of the greatest good.¹⁴

But if, in spite of these arguments, there are still some who mistakenly hold that evil predominates in the world, this is because evil, while less frequent than good, is more conspicuous, just as we are quick to take notice when our organism is out of order, but notice nothing when it is in good health. A momentary sense of dissatisfaction is no proper criterion by which to evaluate the good and evil in the whole, which is the universe and not the small world of men. It is all too human to suppose that all nature is made for us and to despise everything outside ourselves. Many judge that everything is evil if the slightest thing happens in opposition to their wishes. This universal idea leads Leibniz, despite his Christian belief, to an important restriction of the biblical doctrine that the world was created with a view to man. For even though the realm of nature is subservient to the realm of divine grace, nevertheless the realm of grace is in a sense adapted to the realm of nature, which thus acquires a maximum of order and beauty in order to make the compound of the two as perfect as possible. Thus Leibniz' answer to Bayle's criticism of the biblical maxim that, because only man is the image and likeness of God, the main purpose in God's plan is the happiness of man, is as follows:

When God informed the prophet Jonah that He had forgiven the inhabitants of Nineveh, He also mentioned the animals which would have been included in the destruction of the city. For no substance is absolutely contemptible or precious before God. Bayle's misuse or overextension of the

14. *Ibid.*, § 147.

maxim in question throws some light on the source of the difficulties he has raised. Assuredly God attaches more importance to a man than to a lion; but I do not know whether it can be stated with certainty that God prefers one man to the whole species of the lions; but even if this were so, it still would not follow that the interest of a certain number of men would necessarily outweigh the idea of a disorder extending to an infinite number of creatures. Such an opinion would be a remnant of the old and amply decried maxim to the effect that everything had been created for man alone.¹⁵

Thus for Leibniz' universal reason, Job's old question concerning the sin and suffering of the individual man in his relationship with God, is resolved in a well-rounded system of universal harmony, so losing the sharpness of its challenge. In *Candide* Voltaire ridiculed Leibniz' "optimism," his belief that we are living in the best of all possible worlds. And a hundred years after Leibniz, another man of the Enlightenment, Kant, brought the eighteenth-century controversy on the question of a theodicy to a close by demonstrating, in an essay devoted specially to the matter, the necessary "failure of all philosophical attempts at a theodicy."

III

IN HIS ESSAY ON "Religion Within the Limits of Mere Reason" Kant dealt with the problem of evil, not universally in a theodicy, but only with reference to man. Like Leibniz he looked upon Christianity as the only true religion, not, however, because it is the one true faith, but because it is the purest ethical "religion of reason." He distinguishes the "historical" faith of the Church from the pure faith of reason. He leaves the question provisionally open as to whether the historical faith accords with reason. It seems to be a fortunate accident that the Bible, "a book fallen into the hands of men . . . should contain complete the purest teachings of

15. *Ibid.*, § 118.

ethical religion.”¹⁶ There can be many kinds of faith but only a single true religion, and its truth rests on its grounding in reason. Thus the “limits” of reason are not barriers but a positive frame within which a religion, which is ordinarily a mere object of faith, can by philosophy be raised to the level of reason. Hence “mere” reason is pure reason, free from historical contingencies. In consequence of this dual approach to the historical Christian faith and to ahistorical universal reason, Kant’s work on religion is as ambiguous as all post-Christian philosophical theology. On the one hand, it is grounded in Christianity as the only true religion, and on the other, it undermines the absolute confidence of faith by a philosophical interpretation of the fall and of redemption in a kingdom of God to come. If Kant had never known the Bible and had been raised on Lao Tzu and Confucius instead, he would hardly, on the strength of pure reason, have conceived the idea of radical evil—either in its original formulation as a fall from grace or in its ethical interpretation. Nor would it, without the Christian tradition, have occurred to Kant that the supreme purpose of all Creation is man and his ethical perfection and that, though the idea of a good principle is inherent in our ethical reason independently of ecclesiastical faith, Christ is nonetheless personified as the Son of God. As Nietzsche put it, classical German philosophy from Kant to Hegel is an “insidious theology,” although it set out precisely to free itself from theology. The ambiguity of Kant’s work on religion—residing in the fact that it is at once a philosophical justification and a critique of religion—is already apparent in the Preface, where Kant declares that the concept of evil is an ethical concept and as such has no need of grounding in religious faith, although in his conclusions he agrees with Christian doctrine.

Kant’s book has three main parts: (1) On the cohabitation of the evil principle with the good, or on the radical evil in human nature; (2) On the struggle of the good with the evil

16. Kant, “Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft,” III, 5.

principle for the domination of man; (3) On the victory of the good over the evil principle and the establishment of a kingdom of God on earth. It is the first part that interests us chiefly in the present context. When Kant speaks of the radical evil in human nature, he is referring not to man as an animal species, but to specifically *human* nature, which has the specific character of *being able to direct itself*, with reason and freedom, toward good or evil. Thus we are not by nature good or bad or a mixture of the two; as men we are able to become one or the other by committing ourselves in freedom to the moral law and its principles or maxims. As an introduction to this ethical, rational concept of good and evil, Kant discusses pessimism, the view that the world always was and always will be evil, and optimism, the view that the world is growing progressively better. This "world" of which Kant speaks is no longer Leibniz' living universe of monads in harmony with one another; it is exclusively the human world over against the world mechanism of modern Newtonian science. For Kant the world of nature and the human world are no more commensurable than the law of gravitation and the moral law. His inquiry into the origin of evil is no longer cosmological and theological, but purely anthropological. It has no significant bearing on the perfection or deficiency of an all-embracing world order. For Kant, true evil is not metaphysical finiteness or any physical flaw; it is a purely ethical concept, and this indeed has been the prevailing view since the Enlightenment. The plaint that the world is evil, Kant remarks, is as old as history, although our oldest documents describe the beginning of the world as good, a golden age or a state of innocence in paradise. The development of science, he goes on, argues in favor of the opposite, more modern view: that the history of mankind is a progression from the primitive and evil to something better, but this progress involves no moral betterment, either in the personal life of individuals or in the coexistence of states and nations. Faced with the alternative of optimism and pessimism, Kant asks whether there might not be a more reasona-

ble middle course. Perhaps man is neither good nor bad, but in each special case becomes good and bad accordingly as he determines himself, that is, his will, toward one or the other. The contention that man is good or evil by nature would then mean that he, as an ethical person, is capable of *acting* either well or badly, not because he is thus and not otherwise, but because he is able to make good or bad use of his freedom. But why this is possible remains "unfathomable," for freedom, unlike an empirical fact, cannot be derived with necessity from a determining cause. If the origin of evil could be established as a fact, evil action would no longer be free action. Man may by nature possess all manner of natural impulses, instincts, inclinations, desires, and passions, which drive or incline him to this or that; but the crucial question is whether he takes these natural drives and inclinations into his will by giving in to them, or whether he resists them and so makes use of his freedom to self-determination. The instinct of self-preservation and the sexual drive natural to every animal are in themselves neither good nor bad; but in man they can become so, when, for example, he, as an ethical person, behaves with ruthless egoism or unrestrained lust toward his fellow men. The natural inclinations toward good and evil (Kant also speaks of a good or bad "heart") are only "elements" in the self-determination by which a man gives himself a moral "character."

Kant distinguishes three degrees of the natural inclination to evil: (1) the universal *frailty* of human nature; (2) *impurity* of the moral impulse, that is, mixture with extra-moral and immoral impulses; and (3) the *corruption* or perversity of the human heart. Even the best of men is never entirely free from these inclinations to evil. Hence the observation that even the misfortune of our closest friends is not entirely displeasing to us, because it is natural for man to bolster up his feeling of self by comparison with others and consequently to experience satisfaction at being better off than his neighbors. Most evil inclinations, such as greed and envy, the desire for honors and power, feed on such comparison with

others, and men need only live together, says Kant, to become "evil toward one another."

Thus to say that man is *evil* by nature means that he is evil as a morally responsible person, who is responsible for the inclinations, drives, impulses, and passions which Kant subsumes under the head of self-love (but which—in indifference, disfavor, enmity—relate to others). And to say that man is evil by nature does not mean with natural necessity, as though he could be no different; in man, rather, every evil inclination is an ethically evil inclination, for which he knows himself to be responsible, although it is his by nature. And because the inclination to evil is rooted in man, though not innate but acquired by his own fault, Kant speaks of "radical" evil. Its radicality has been manifested throughout human history, in the acts of men living together. This radical evil is not, however, grounded in diabolical wickedness or in the instincts of self-love. Its foundation itself can only be of an ethical nature, it is a perversion of the moral order; in other words, it must reside in our subordination of the moral law to our instinctive drives. A man who takes the moral commandment into his will, yet subordinates it to self-love, acts immorally, even if his outward acts are in keeping with the moral law. Thus, for example, we may help others because it flatters our self-love and sense of superiority to do so, but for this same reason the man who is helped will wish to avenge himself on his benefactor. But this evil in human nature is not an absolute evil, that is, a willing of evil for its own sake, for that would give man the character of a devil. It is merely a "perversity of the heart" consonant with the universal frailty and impurity of human nature. Translated into Christian terms: We are all sinners, no man is righteous. But in contrast to the teachings of the Bible, Kant does not explain the origin of evil "historically" by the fall or by any other event in time, but attributes it to the fundamentally free action of man. Ethical evil can have its source only in the constitution of man, which is itself ethical; thus ethical evil is something fundamental. In this sense it cannot be explained, that is,

derived from something else. It is a freely willed leap without compelling cause, an abrupt step—brought about by man's own fault—from innocence to guilt, similar to the abrupt fall of Adam but without the intermediary of a seducer. Evil, says Kant, can only have sprung from ethical evil and not from the mere limitations of our nature as in Leibniz, and yet man's original predisposition is toward the good. How man's step into perversity was possible is as inexplicable as everything else that does not happen necessarily, but is contingent insofar as it springs from freedom. But from this it also follows that even in the most wicked of men betterment and a recovery of the original predisposition toward the good must at all times be possible. Man is not simply constituted good, but he is made for the good, and accordingly reason demands that he be *able* to be what he *ought* to be. And even if it is supposed that for his betterment he requires superhuman assistance, the help of divine grace, this does not diminish his moral responsibility, for he has to make himself worthy of such help before he can obtain and accept it. The ultimate foundation of a religion of reason is and remains the freedom to self-determination and responsibility for oneself in respect of good and evil. The question of how it is possible that a man naturally inclined to evil should make himself into a good man surpasses our understanding, as does the opposite question concerning the leap into evil. In reply Kant says only that we, in our moral conscience, know that we ought to be better men and must be capable of becoming so, for an *ought* without a *can* would not be a rational injunction. But for such a change of heart it does not suffice to "reform" our ways; it demands a total transformation or "revolution" of attitude through a unique and unalterable decision. In Christian terms: a rebirth.

On the basis of these considerations, Kant, in the second and third parts of his essay, describes the struggle of the good with the evil principle and its victory through the founding of a "kingdom of God on earth." Under this title Kant puts forward the idea of an ethical community of men. For just as

all evil has its reality in the life of men together and not in isolated individuals, so likewise the good can be realized only in an ethical community, which with its united forces fosters the good and combats evil. In biblical terms, Kant calls this ethical community the "people of God," whose kingdom is an invisible church, the church of all men of good will. Kant was convinced that the ecclesiastical belief in a future kingdom of God would move gradually closer to this purely rational faith and that, of all the epochs in the history of the invisible Church, the present is the best, because it is developing the historical germ of Christianity more and more with a view to building a kingdom of God on earth; that is, an ethical community of all men, though, to be sure, the crooked wood of which man is made can never be expected to become entirely straight.

CONCLUSION

WITH THE END of German idealism and its philosophical theology, the attempts at a rational interpretation of the biblical faith lost their basis and their interest. The theological concepts of "sin" and "kingdom of God" become meaningless once the faith in judgment and redemption is lost. What remained on the one hand was a belief in progress¹⁷—the belief that the world is getting better—and on the other our experience of the technological organization of evil made possible precisely by scientific progress. Along with its theological background of sin, judgment, and redemption, the question of *ethical* good and evil has disappeared from present-day philosophy. The ethics of Sartre's existentialism reduces itself to mere "commitment," regardless to what. Heidegger's fundamental ontology recognizes only the difference between "authentic" and "inauthentic" existence and

17. See K. Löwith, *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen* (Stuttgart, 1953), pp. 175 ff. (English translation: *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957].)

ends by finding the ultimate principle of the "appropriate" (*Schicklichen*) in the history (*Geschichte*) of "Being" as the "destiny of a destination" (*Geschick einer Schickung*).

Whether or not we invoke Nietzsche, our thinking today is "beyond good and evil," not because we relate the question of the *summum bonum* to the universe as a whole, but because morally we are no longer governed by the Christian tradition. In questioning the morality of morals and the value of ethical values, Nietzsche inaugurated a new attitude toward the justification of evil, for he denied the premise common to Leibniz and Bayle, namely the existence of God. Now that the biblical God is dead, he declared, man no longer has any basis for self-justification. He is no more in need of justification than the universe of which he is a part, and the universe is "extramoral."¹⁸ There is no point in trying to justify something that is by nature as it is and cannot be otherwise. Leibniz called such a necessity an "absolute" or "Mohammedan" necessity in contradistinction to "*fatum Christi*," as he called divine Providence which, to be sure, knows everything in advance but leaves man's will free and admits of evil for man's greater good. But any claim to justify the evil and evils of the world before God as the *summum bonum* collapses when—as in Nietzsche—the living being of the universe once again replaces the biblical God and man ceases to be anything more than *one* ring "in the great ring of the universe." In Nietzsche's *Human All-too-Human* we find an aphorism that is crucial in this connection: "What is the vanity of the vainest of men beside the vanity of the humblest in feeling himself to be a 'man' within nature and the world?"

Yet, when, in the last aphorism of *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche defines the living being of the universe as a *will* which wills only itself and which instead of moving toward a goal moves in a circle, this anti-Christian formula still reflects the will of the dead God, who willed a world to be and who

18. Cf. Löwith, *Nietzsches Philosophie der ewigen Wiederkehr des Gleichen* (Stuttgart, 1956), pp. 99 f.

still haunts us as a dead shadow. Even Nietzsche does not share the Heraclitean view of the world as a game played for its own sake; to him it is a universal *conatus* (Leibniz, Schelling, Schopenhauer), lacking however in any purpose and therefore "meaning" (in the sense of *telos* and *finis*). The "will to power," as a will not only of man but also of the world, wills nothing but itself.¹⁹ With this idea of the world's self-willing, Nietzsche transcended the Christian tradition as far as it is possible to do so from within. If the world wills only itself, we cannot ask *to what end* it exists, and if, as the totality of natural existence it is also the first and last, we can no longer ask with Leibniz, Schelling, and Heidegger *why* there is anything at all rather than nothing. Both the question "to what end?" and the question "why?" entered into philosophy through the biblical story of the Creation, and with them the question of "why evil?" and the striving to justify it.

19. Cf. to the contrary Leibniz, § 51, in which the idea of a self-willing will in respect of human action is criticized.